

WEBSTER LEAVING AS C.I.A. DIRECTOR; EX-DEPUTY IN LINE

The Washington Post
The New York Times A1
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 9 MAY 1991



Associated Press

William H. Webster after announcement of his retirement.

NO SUCCESSOR YET

Question Is Raised Over Whether White House Nudged Him Out

By ANDREW ROSENTHAL

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 8 — President Bush today announced the retirement of William H. Webster, the Director of Central Intelligence, who polished the image of the espionage community in his four years in the job but remained on the fringes of the Bush Administration's national security operation.

Mr. Bush said he had not chosen a successor for the 67-year-old Mr. Webster, who said he wanted to return to practicing law. Some officials said Mr. Webster had been gently encouraged to retire.

Administration officials said the leading candidate to replace Mr. Webster was Robert M. Gates, the deputy national security adviser and former deputy director of Central Intelligence.

Mr. Gates was nominated for the job before, in 1987, but withdrew his name in the face of strong opposition in the Senate. His confirmation hearing became embroiled in controversy over the intelligence agency's role in the Iran-contra scandal and Mr. Gates's own own actions in that period.

Bush Keeps Choices Open

Other possible contenders to succeed Mr. Webster are James Lilley, the Ambassador to China and a close friend of Mr. Bush and Bobby Ray Inman, the deputy director of the Central Intelligence in the first years of the Reagan Administration and former head of the National Security Agency. Another person mentioned today was Senator Warren B. Rudman, the New Hampshire Republican who is a friend and political ally of Mr. Bush.

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"I haven't considered successors yet, but a worthy man, Gates," Mr. Bush said when asked at a news conference about the possibility that Mr. Gates would take over the intelligence post. "We all have great respect for him." [Excerpts, page B14.]

Choice of Inside or Outside

Friends of Mr. Gates said that they thought his selection was certain and that they were surprised when Mr. Bush did not announce a choice today. Mr. Gates has gained visibility and stature while serving as deputy national security adviser, especially for his role in helping to coordinate policy during the Persian Gulf war. But questions linger in the Senate about his role during the Iran-contra affair, when he was deputy intelligence director.

The list of candidates' names that were mentioned today reflected the choice facing Mr. Bush, himself a former intelligence director who has always taken a strong interest in the espionage and intelligence-gathering field.

Some Presidents have preferred to give the post to intelligence professionals like Richard M. Helms, who was appointed in 1966 as the first career officer to head the intelligence community, or non-political figures from outside the field, like Mr. Webster and Adm. Stansfield Turner, who served under President Jimmy Carter.

Other Presidents have named political figures, like Mr. Bush, who was appointed by Gerald Ford, and William J. Casey, who moved in 1981 from being Ronald Reagan's campaign manager to director of Central Intelligence.

For Mr. Bush, who says he is committed to keeping politics and policy considerations out of intelligence analysis, the departure of Mr. Webster provides an opportunity to reinforce the concept of nonpolitical leadership of the intelligence community that was more common in the early years of the intelligence agency.

Praise for Webster

Mr. Webster was the first intelligence chief to bridge two administrations since William E. Colby, who served under Presidents Nixon and Ford. The last director to serve under different parties was Mr. Helms, who was appointed by President Johnson and retained by President Nixon. Mr. Bush has said he favors making the job apolitical so directors can serve under different presidents and parties.

The director of central intelligence is best known as the head of the intelligence agency, but also coordinates spending and operations for all American espionage units, including the National Security Agency, which conducts electronic eavesdropping; the National Reconnaissance Office, which launches and operates satellites, and the Defense Intelligence Agency, which primarily analyzes military intelligence.

At the news conference in the White House, Mr. Bush praised what he called the "superb job" done by Mr. Webster, a onetime Federal judge with a reputation for integrity who was nominated for the job by President Ronald Reagan in March 1987 after serving as Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

But officials said there had been a growing sentiment in the Administration for some time that Mr. Webster should make way for a more engaged intelligence chief. Rumors about Mr. Webster's departure have circulated on a regular basis in the White House and other parts of the Government for months.

Not Part of Inner Circle

Mr. Bush's own comments today underscored how Mr. Webster's attitude toward the post of intelligence chief and his management style had made him a figure remote from the inner councils of the White House. During the Persian Gulf war, for example, Mr. Webster was not a member of the "Big Eight," the name given to the President and his inner circle of military, diplomatic and national security advisers.

The President said, "A strong nation requires a strong intelligence organization and Bill Webster has directed our efforts according to the guidelines that I set down at the beginning of this Administration, that the C.I.A. would have the single mission of providing intelligence to the policymakers of this Government. And he's performed admirably. And that is a very important point: Intelligence, not trying to shape policy."

Mr. Webster and the intelligence agencies he supervises came under some criticism last year after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait caught the United States by surprise. But Mr. Bush brushed off that criticism today, saying, "We all came under criticism early on and all I say is, 'Look at the results.'"

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Photographs by George Tames for The New York Times

President Bush announcing retirement of William H. Webster as head of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Moving Between Offices

Mr. Gates has an unusual record of moving between the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency, and between Republican and Democratic Administrations. A Soviet specialist by training, he started at the intelligence agency in 1969 and moved to the National Security Council under President Nixon. He served President Ford, returned briefly to the agency, and then was retained by President Carter.

Mr. Gates returned to the intelligence agency again in 1979, where he became chief of the intelligence analysis division, and then deputy director. Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser, brought him back to the White House in 1989 to serve as his deputy.

Mr. Gates, who has advocated a cautious approach to the Soviet Union and Mikhail S. Gorbachev, clashed with Secretary of State James A. Baker 2d early in the Bush Administration over a pessimistic speech that Mr. Gates wanted to deliver about the prospects for change under the Soviet leader. Mr. Baker killed the speech.

Mr. Gates is being promoted for the intelligence position by Mr. Scowcroft, officials said.

Somewhat Distant Relationship

But Mr. Gates's relationship with Mr. Bush is somewhat distant and formal and lacking in the kind of easy jocularity that the President values so highly.

Mr. Gates also has a potential political liability in the way his 1987 confirmation hearings were dominated by the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran.

Mr. Gates was considered by many lawmakers to have been in a position to raise alarms about the way Mr. Casey and Lieut. Col. Oliver North, a member of the National Security Council staff, funneled profits from arms sales in Iran to the Nicaraguan rebels. Mr. Gates came under criticism for not doing so.

Some Senators also criticized him for preparing testimony by William Casey, then director of Central Intelligence, that many lawmakers later said was false. Mr. Gates said the testimony was "a fair statement of what we knew at the time."